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Shoes

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Shoes

by Jenny Sullivan

Clicking conspicuously along on a pair of high heels, I realize that I've always been scared of the sound of my own shoes. It seems so presumptuous—announcing my presence to the whole world, clacking out my existence for everyone to take notice. I've always admired the girls who stand to their full height in their heels, walking along, unhesitatingly, unheeding of the noise. They sail along in a graceful gait and a regal manner as their heels evenly sound against the pavement.

Attempting to possess the proper open-mindedness of an enlightened liberal arts college student, I've learned to appreciate the world from a feminist lens. I don't think it's too far of a stretch to claim that even in our liberated society, patriarchal codes may still define the way we move, the way we look, the way we dress. Though we no longer wear the corsets and bustles of the Victorian "angel of the hearth," Lois Tyson maintains that "the tight skirt and high heels" of today's woman "create a kind of 'feminine' walk ... symbolically akin both to the restrained physical capability imposed by nineteenth-century women's clothing and to the male sexual access to women's bodies such attire allows."

Why then, do I still love wearing my high heels? Isn't that just the way men so often want us, high enough for them to admire, but with no room to move? A pedestal is high, but the space is paralyzing in its smallness. We cannot run or stand firmly grounded. It's so easy to stumble; must we lean on our men for support?

Ever since I can remember, I have had a recurring dream. Soldiers in dark uniforms hunt me down—across frozen

landscapes and through dark woods. They are brute forces I cannot escape, with immovable faces that do not soften at my fear. Heavy booted men speed closer and closer, pounding echoes into my brain, as I revert to slow motion in my flimsy shoes, helpless and without defense in the snow.

Recently, I attended a wedding in a new dress, complete with new silver heels. It was an outdoor wedding—with the ceremony on a golf course. As I moved to take my seat, the point of each heel dug into the moist green. With each step I pulled out my shoe, slick with green muck, just to sink the other step deep into the earth, my foot trapped in the ground.

Early this year, with daunting three-inch cream stiletto heels, I walked down the runway for a low-budget, school-sponsored fashion show. As the first woman out, I was stunned at the gathering of a couple hundred students before me. Walking fast, my shoes pushing my hips to swing abruptly from side to side, I was exhilarated by the attention. But underneath those searing lights and staring eyes, I somehow felt robbed of my personality and reduced to a pair of legs.

It's the power of the shoes that they, at least, keep men's attention. The eyes turn and the cars honk, even if I'm just pumping gas in Springfield. But it's a cheap thrill. I guess I'm holding out for the day when they'll look and see a little bit more than the illusion of long legs and defined calves—maybe, just maybe, they'll see a tiny piece of me. Or are the shoes stomping lies into my mind? For I encourage my own plight, I wear the shoes, I allow it to happen.

I remember being unsteady and precarious, worn from dancing the night away on two narrow shoe points. On the cobblestones of an Oxford street, I trip wearily back to my room—my heels catching in the ancient cracks. When he takes me up in his arms, I don't resist. Then up the three flights of stairs, I am relieved of the burden of my own weight.

Because if I'm honest with myself, every once in a while, I want to feel light and able to be swept away. My junior-high feminine ideal is still with me. In the seventh grade, I was given

old worn copy of a seventies beauty guide for Christian young women. In the chapter called *The Art of Walking*, there was a whimsical picture of a girl. She walked down a garden path, one foot placed straight before the other one—toes pointed slightly out. Her hair floated in swirls around her shoulders, in long, wispy tendrils. Her eyes were bright and luminous.

As an awkward fourteen-year-old, with a tangled mess of red hair and wide, flat feet, stained with dirt from climbing trees outdoors, I envisioned that girl, and wanted shoes to cover my ugly feet. Maybe walking in a line straight enough, like the girl in the picture, I would float away and become part of the magical essence of femininity.

And sometimes, my shoes make me believe that maybe I could still float away. Sometimes, I slip on heels to dance alone in my living room—waltzing in imaginary ballrooms to invisible strings. At these moments I feel the aura of my femininity—freed from my imperfect, awkward body, like the girl on the garden path, with the big luminous eyes. I am woman, I am female and I embrace this along with my shoes.

I remember the night that I faced the soldiers in my dreams. Pounding up the stairs behind me, a soldier was breathing, leering, boots crashing against the wood. Suddenly I turned, took my slipper and hurled it directly at his head. He was stunned, caught off guard, allowing me to slip through the door to safety. It was the first time I had fought back.

Now, I have the oddest inclinations to throw my shoes at the men that drive me crazy, the men that tear my heart apart. I'm not a violent person by nature, not prone to random acts of vengeance whatsoever. Yet, there are times that my hands shake with my desire to throw shoes at the one that makes me feel like nothing, the one that exploits my emotions when his fragile ego needs bolstered, the one that makes me feel like snow crunching under the dark boots of the soldiers in my dreams. Many times I catch myself reaching down towards my high heel—ready to grab it and hurl it with all my might.

When all of my weight is intensely concentrated on two small points in space, maybe all of my energy is concentrated there too, shooting out of my heel. All my feelings, love, care—all of my will to live. Maybe, I want to hit him across the head with the weight he so often seems to steal from me. Maybe, I want my pointed heels to be channels of the essence of me—so powerful that he cannot ignore me any longer. Maybe, somehow it would make a dent through his thick mind—a dent into his numb heart—gritty with layers of build-up. Sometimes, I want my heels to sink into men's hearts the same way they sank into the wet earth at the wedding on the golf course. It's time to take back my shoes.

Recently, at a wedding reception, I looked into the eyes of someone who used to love me and the tenderness I used to find so familiar had glazed over into a stare of indifference. As he stood to the side, I moved out onto the wooden dance floor with my red dress and red pointed shoes, along with a circle of other girls. My shoes began to tap an even, steady, insistent beat upon the floor, stirring something inside my blood. Dancing, whipping my red dress up around my knees, I relished the sound each time my heel turned, crashing onto the wooden panels, and I relished the gaze from his eyes that could not look away. You cannot erase me, crash. I won't be forgotten, crash. You can't make me nothing, crash, crash, crash.